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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9521
INFO RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 9417
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ OCT 8973
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 5510
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 6107
RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL PRIORITY 4117
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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 007397

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/15/2017
TAGS: [KJUS](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: PRE-ELECTIONS CLIMATE IN VALLEDUPAR: CRIMINAL
BANDS AND PARA-POLITICAL INFLUENCE REMAIN CONCERNS

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer. Reason: 1.4(b,d)

¶1. (U) Summary: Candidates and officials in Valledupar, capital of the northern Cesar Department, report some paramilitary influence in local campaigns and isolated security threats against candidates, but note an overall improvement in openness and transparency this election season. The GOC is taking steps to provide security to candidates and encourage transparency, but concerns about the growth of new criminal bands remain widespread. Local media say press freedom is greater than in past elections, with no paramilitary threats against reporters. End Summary.

Valledupar: Former Paramilitary Stronghold

¶2. (U) Valledupar, capital of Cesar department in northern Colombia, has a history of paramilitary presence and wealthy landowners who have long held political control. The demobilization of 5000 paramilitary led by Valledupar native Rodrigo Tovar Pupo (aka Jorge 40) reduced violence, but the emergence of new criminal groups is a serious security threat according to local Prosecutor General's Office (Fiscalia), Human Rights Ombudsman (Defensoria) and OAS Special Mission to Support the Peace Process (OAS/MAPP) officials. The Colombian daily El Tiempo reported on September 6 that homicides between January-September in Valledupar doubled from 51 in 2006 to 100 in 2007. Homicides in Cesar rose from 159 to 310 during the same time period. A July 2007 Defensoria report indicates 23 municipalities in Cesar (92%) are at risk from the presence of the FARC and emerging criminal bands.

Criminal Bands a Concern

¶3. (U) Acting Governor Rodrigo Canosa Guerrero (Liberal Party) said emerging criminal groups like the Aguilas Negras were a security concern throughout Cesar but did not believe they would interfere directly in the upcoming elections. Guerrero, who has been at his post since May when then-governor Hernando Molina was arrested for paramilitary ties, said overall security had improved but feared recruitment efforts by the Aguilas Negras were intensifying.

Mayor Ciro Arturo Pupo (Jorge 40's cousin) agreed security was better, but said crimes committed by demobilized paras were alarming residents. Local Defensor Agustin Florez told us paramilitary influence had decreased since the last election, as well as the number of threats to candidates. Valledupar Bishop Oscar Jose Velez Isaza also underscored the overall improvement in security in the region, noting residents have greater freedom to travel. Still, he said the city needs to focus on the high unemployment rate among demobilized paramilitaries.

¶4. (C) On September 28, police arrested 12 persons (formerly demobilized from Bloque Central Boliver) for the August 16 murder of former mayor and Liberal party leader, Anuar Yaver Cortes, in Aguachica in southern Cesar. All 200 Liberal party candidates in Cesar temporarily suspended their campaigns to protest. They resumed their campaigns after Minister of Defense Juan Manuel Santos visited Aguachica and said providing security to candidates would be a top priority. Luis Fabian Fernandez, Liberal candidate for governor, has received threats from criminal bands to cease his campaign and now travels with several bodyguards. Liberal Senator Perdo Muvdi and Liberal party leader in Cesar, Jose Luis Uron, said they faced multiple threats from the estimated 400 criminal bands that operate in Cesar. These "third generation mafia" were taking over where FARC guerrillas and paramilitaries once held power.

¶5. (C) Local Fiscal Franklin Martinez said the Aguilas Negras have been circulating flyers, making threats to their drug trafficking rivals, but not threatening candidates. The Fiscalia investigates threats but has no control over financial corruption which he considered a bigger danger. Vote-buying is rampant but seen as part of the electoral process. Martinez feared Jorge 40 still influenced a wide

spectrum of social and political actors in the region. Cesar's Polo Democratico Alternativo president, Aldemar Palmera, said none of its candidates have received threats but voiced concerns about financial corruption and questionable campaign funds.

Para-politico Influence Persists

¶6. (U) Former local senators Alvaro Araujo Castro and Mauricio Pimiento were arrested in February for their paramilitary ties. In September, investigations began against Alfredo Cuello Baute (Conservative), former president of the House of Representatives, and Representative Alvaro Moron Cuello (Alas Equipo) for their alleged ties to Jorge ¶40. A public debate on September 19 between six mayoral candidates ended with rancorous accusations between two candidates over alleged campaign financing from a regional lottery company tied to Jorge 40.

¶7. (U) None of the three gubernatorial candidates--Jaime Camilo Murgas (Conservative), Christian Hernando Moreno (Opcion Centro) and Arturo Rafael Calderon (Independiente Libre)--have received any threats. The race is currently neck to neck between Murgas and Calderon, who was the Health Minister under Governor Molina. Moreno, who withdrew his candidacy in 2003 due to threats, is supported by the Polo Democratico Alternativo party (PDA). In an August 6 radio show, ex-Senator Araujo endorsed Calderon. In the September 23 issue of La Noticia, Senator Gustavo Petro (PDA) accused Calderon of being a part of a "mafia" perpetuating fear and control. Flyers are circulating suggesting Calderon enjoys the backing of former Senators Araujo and Pimiento as well as former Governor Molina.

GOC Reaction, Ready for elections

¶8. (U) Vice President Francisco Santos Calderon visited Valledupar on September 20 to oversee the signing of a

transparency pact with mayoral and gubernatorial candidates. He urged candidates to demonstrate commitment to clean campaigning to rid the region of its negative political reputation. Although largely symbolic, candidates pledged to make their campaigns transparent.

¶9. (U) Press freedom is also more notable than in the past, according to Mildred Zapata of Valledupar's Vanguardia newspaper. She said reporters no longer receive threats for writing critical pieces against politicians or criminal bands. Editorial campaigns calling for the "de-parapoliticization of Cesar" have run in both Vanguardia and La Nacion recently.

¶10. (U) The National Registrar's Office transferred local electoral registrars from Bucaramanga to Valledupar in September to ensure objectivity. They told us preparations for election day were proceeding smoothly. They expect a high voter turnout (60%) due to the city's security measures and additional police postings at all voting sites.
Brownfield